

Testimony of
Councilmember Kathy Patterson, Chairperson
D.C. Council Committee on Education, Libraries and Recreation

Before the

Committee on Government Reform

U.S. House of Representatives

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the House Committee on Government Reform. I am Councilmember Kathy Patterson. I represent Ward 3 in northwest Washington and since January, have served as chair of the Council Committee on Education, Libraries and Recreation. I have been a member of the Council since 1995, and I sought the position as a public school parent and advocate.

The D.C. Council's formal responsibilities with regard to the public school system are these:

- Consider and approve an annual allocation of funds for D.C. Public Schools and public charter schools;
- Consider and confirm the mayor's nominees for four members of the Board of Education until we return to an all-elected Board in two years;
- Approve collective bargaining agreements and all contracts that exceed \$1 million or are multi-year;
- Provide oversight of the school system;
- Consider and approve changes to the D.C. Code that affect schools. Last year, for example, we approved legislation retaining a Board of Education as the policy-making body that governs D.C. Public Schools; we also approved legislation transferring the function of school security from DCPS to the Metropolitan Police Department.

I was asked to address the Council's priorities for D.C. Public Schools. These include improving school facilities; accountability for the expenditure of public funds by D.C. Public Schools; and directing resources to local schools. In addition to these priorities established by the Council in our annual planning process, there are priorities for me as chair of the Committee. These include promoting stable leadership; providing stable and adequate funding; and using oversight to promote steady progress on the school system's reform agenda that includes comprehensive new educational standards and strengthened professional development. Part of promoting stability includes advocating for a multiyear budget for the school system, a subject I will come back to and one I expect will be discussed by other witnesses today.

Another specific policy goal of mine is promoting and funding universal pre-kindergarten in the District of Columbia. Unlike most school systems, we already serve roughly half of the city's 4-year-olds in D.C. Public Schools. Given the extensive research on the importance of good early childhood education, particularly for disadvantaged populations, there is no question that we should be serving all 4-year-olds and moving from there to provide all 3-year-olds with quality pre-K education.

My Committee agenda also includes oversight on the public charter school legislation and I anticipate one or more hearings in the fall. There are several specific issues to be addressed, including the funding process and issues of financial liability when a charter school closes, and I expect a range of other issues will be raised during the course of testimony.

It is important to understand both the breadth of and the limitations on the Council's role with regard to public schools. Under the Home Rule Charter, the Board is the policy making entity governing the schools. The Council approves a budget each year, but may not direct how those funds are spent. You have asked this question, and it reflects a priority for my colleagues: how does the Council work with the Board to promote financial and management accountability? Our principal formal means for promoting accountability is the bully pulpit of open, televised Council oversight hearings. We serve accountability by asking hard questions and doing the follow up to make sure we receive candid and complete answers. We use our annual consideration of the school system budget as an opportunity to secure the kind and level of accountability for the expenditure of public funds that is expected by the public we serve.

I would now like to describe where I think DCPS has been; where the system is today, and what I would recommend as an agenda for this committee with regard to public schools.

I have been involved in public school advocacy for 15 years – 11 years on the Council and several years prior to that, from the point at which my children entered public school and I began my own education on the school system, and the city's, financial crisis. During my tenure on the Council the D.C. Public Schools have had seven superintendents. There have also been four different and distinct institutions standing in the shoes of the Board of Education. The mayor and Council have gone through two long and contentious debates over whether there will be a Board of Education, in 2000 and again last year.

It is not possible to serve children well when the leadership is topsy turvy; when it changes by the month. The best education reform plans in the world – and those of Superintendents Franklin Smith and Arlene Ackerman were sound – cannot succeed without time, perseverance, buy-in from the political establishment and confidence on the part of parents and staff.

What we have today in D.C. Public Schools is a chance for stability. That is the reason I am more optimistic about the future of the public schools than at any other point in my tenure on the Council. Local political leaders settled the issue of the system's governance structure. We will have a Board of Education that is part elected, part appointed, for two more years, then move to an all-elected Board. We know that, and though there is one more change coming, that knowledge promotes stability.

The leadership of the city – Mayor Williams, Chairman Cropp and my predecessor as committee chair, Councilmember Chavous -- were invited by the Board of Education to

participate in a superintendent search last year, and they recruited and hired Dr. Janey from whom you will hear this morning. This is not his first superintendency, and that is significant. This is only the second time in recent history that the D.C. Public Schools have been led by someone who had served as a superintendent before; who is not doing on-the-job training. The Board itself is gaining in experience; two new members elected last year bring energy and patience – but patience that is not without limits, and that is a good thing in and of itself.

The Council recently completed work on the DCPS budget for FY 2006. The Board proposed a budget of \$775 million, and noted another \$38 million in unbudgeted needs. The mayor proposed a budget of \$800 million, including funding to meet what had been described as unbudgeted needs. The Council added roughly \$15 million to avert local school staff reductions while the school system reevaluates its local schools funding formula. Even with those funding increases approved by both the mayor and the Council, the schools leadership claims to need additional funds to cover raises that might be negotiated with school labor unions, and additional special education costs.

It is my hope, and I have made this clear to both Dr. Janey and President Cafritz, that the Council's Education Committee can be of assistance to the Superintendent and Board as they revise their FY 2006 operating budget to take into account the additional funds, and the additional spending needs. The Office of the Chief Financial Officer is reviewing the special education spending, with a particular focus on private school tuition payments and I am hopeful that that audit will provide options to better manage expenditures. And the superintendent initiated a comprehensive, comparative finance study by the Council of the Great City Schools, to complement the academic study released early last year. I am hopeful that this study will be helpful to the Board in reviewing the system's expenditures.

The Committee asked that we speak to facilities needs, one of the highest priorities for members of the D.C. Council. The budget just approved includes \$147 million in capital funding for FY 2006, and the Council approved an additional \$12.2 million to cover debt service for additional capital funding. That additional funding is designed as a special revenue fund to promote public-private partnerships, enhance in-house special education capacity and facilitate co-location with public charter schools. We are still working out the details of that special funding among Councilmembers, the Board and the administration and will finalize the legislative language early next month.

This brings me to what I hope will become an agenda for this Committee: assisting in securing additional federal support to meet the facilities needs of D.C. Public Schools. I hope to see the special revenue fund we are creating becomes a repository for federal support, including funding based on Congresswoman Norton's Fair Federal Compensation Act. That legislation would transfer federal taxes already paid by individuals who work in the District of Columbia into a designated D.C. infrastructure account. A significant portion of that funding can, and should, be allocated for school facilities. A parent-led coalition has, as you know, promoted 100% federal funding to rebuild the District's schools, and I have attached a summary of the PROP 100 proposal

to my testimony. I am an elected official and an appropriator, and I do not enjoy asking for federal dollars: but the need is obvious and it is large. And as long as District taxpayers continue to pay the bill for police protection for the President of the United States, I will be sanguine coming here and asking for federal support to improve the bricks and mortar that house District school children.

There is a second agenda item I would urge the Committee to consider, one I mentioned earlier. Dr. Janey and President Cafritz have asked the Council to consider a transitional multiyear budget for D.C. Public Schools. This would mean a 3-year budget beginning next July when the school system transitions to a July-June fiscal year. A multiyear budget will promote stable planning and funding, but would require an amendment to the District of Columbia Charter. I have introduced a sense of the Council provision to this end, and while my colleagues have not had an opportunity to weigh in on this issue, I am hopeful that they will be supportive. I will hold a public hearing on this legislation on June 23 and hope to see the charter amendment acted on by the Congress by the end of the year. I urge you to support and to champion that proposal, noting, again, that I speak as the Committee chair and not for the full Council.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on D.C. Public Schools, and I will be happy to respond to the Committee's questions.